DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 423 973 PS 026 889

AUTHOR	Cornish, Mary; Noblit, George
TITLE	Bringing the Community into the Process: Issues and Promising Practices for Involving Parents & Business in Local Smart Start Partnerships. UNC Smart Start Evaluation Report.
INSTITUTION	North Carolina Univ., Chapel Hill. Frank Porter Graham Center.
PUB DATE	1997-04-00
NOTE	18p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, 105 Smith Level Road, CB #8180, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-8180; phone: 919-966-3871.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Case Studies; Change Agents; Community Involvement; Community Role; Cooperation; *Early Childhood Education; *Family Programs; *Health Services; *Integrated Services; *Partnerships in Education; Program Evaluation; School Business Relationship; State Programs; Telephone Surveys; Young Children
IDENTIFIERS	*Business Community Relationship; North Carolina; *Smart Start NC

ABSTRACT

Smart Start is North Carolina's partnership between state government and local leaders, service providers, and families to better serve children under age 6 and their families. The aim of the program is ensuring that all children enter school healthy and ready to learn. This study examined parent and business involvement in local Smart Start partnerships, documenting the nature and level of parent and business involvement and identifying promising practices for expanding and enhancing community participation. Data were collected through telephone interviews with 24 executive directors and one randomly selected parent and business person from each partnership, as well as multi-site case studies of four partnerships with high community participation and satisfaction. Findings indicated that parents, business people, and executive directors agreed that community involvement was essential. An array of strategies supported involvement. Parents suggested that increased numbers, community outreach, and improved attitudes were essential for parent involvement. Business people recommended public awareness, education, and clearly and broadly defined role to support business involvement. Roles and responsibility levels differed between parents and business people, with business people more satisfied with their roles than parents. Community participation was an ongoing challenge for most partnerships and state pressures undermined collaboration. An examination of case study partnerships revealed promising practices instrumental in supporting involvement and contributing to satisfaction. There was a strong commitment to community involvement and it was made a priority. Key community leaders were recruited and the number and diversity of community representatives was increased. (Author/KB)

****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 423 973

Smart START

Bringing the Community into the Process

Issues and promising practices for involving parents & business in local Smart Start partnerships

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Donna Bryant
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

UNC Smart Start Evaluation Report
April 1997

PS 026889

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Bringing the Community Into the Process:
Issues and promising practices for involving parents and business in local Smart Start partnerships
UNC Smart Start Evaluation Report
April 1997

This report was written by Mary Cornish and George Noblit. Data for this report were gathered as part of the Smart Start Evaluation contract from the Department of Human Resources to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. We would like to thank all of the parents, business people, board members, and executive directors who participated in this evaluation.

For additional copies of this report and other Smart Start evaluation reports, contact Betsy Lowman at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, 105 Smith Level Road, CB# 8180, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-8180 or call (919) 966-3871.

400 copies of this document were printed at a cost of $337.00, or $.84 apiece.

There exists an increasing recognition that 'the institutions and agencies whose mission it is to nurture and strengthen children and families must collaborate . . . no single institution has the resources or the capacity to do the job alone' (vii) . . . without the collaborative efforts of families, business, and other social organizations these significant problems will continue to undermine the effective delivery of public education services.[1]

—Patrick Galvin
Coordination Among Schools, Families, and Communities

Smart Start, the North Carolina Early Childhood Initiative, was established in 1993 as a partnership between state government and local leaders, service providers, and families to better serve children ages birth to five and their families. The aim is to ensure that all children enter school healthy and ready to learn. Smart Start's innovative approach requires local community partnerships to plan how best to meet their own community's needs, improve and expand previous programs for children and families, and design and implement new programs.

Local Smart Start partnerships are expected to achieve these goals by engaging in collaborative planning and decision-making which includes broad-based community participation. In order to guarantee that a diverse range of stakeholders are included in the collaboration process, the state mandated local partnerships to include representatives of specific agencies and constituencies. To date, partnerships have reported tremendous success in bringing together human service professionals from a variety of public and non-profit agencies.[2] However, participation from other mandated constituencies, particularly parents and business, has been more problematic. Formative evaluations of the twelve pioneer partnerships conducted by the Smart Start Evaluation Team have documented difficulties the partnerships have had in getting and keeping parents and business involved.[3] Further, these evaluations have raised concerns regarding the extent to which parents and business are actively engaged and meaningfully involved in the collaboration process.

Building on issues raised in prior formative evaluations, this study closely examined parent and business involvement in local Smart Start partnerships. The purpose was to document the nature and level of parent and business involvement in twenty-four local partnerships across the state and to identify promising practices for expanding and enhancing community participation. Herein, the term "community" will be used interchangeably with the phrase "parent and business involvement."[4]

The study was carried out in two phases: telephone interviews and multi-site case studies during the spring and summer of 1996. In phase one, telephone interviews were conducted with the executive directors of the twelve pioneer partnerships and the twelve second round partnerships. One randomly selected parent and business person from each of the twenty-four partnerships were also invited to be interviewed. Based on sixty-six interviews, four partnerships were chosen for the case studies of promising community involvement practices. The sites were selected because each had high levels of community participation and satisfaction (parent and/or business), low turnover of community representatives, and employed a broad range of involvement strategies. In phase two, interviews, observation, and document review were used to collect data in each case study partnership. Open-ended in-depth interviews, the primary method used, were conducted with parents, business people, and those identified by parents and business people as inviting and supportive of their participation. A total of 57 interviews were conducted across the four case study partnerships.

Individual feedback was provided to each participating partnership. Separate reports were written for each partnership summarizing its strengths and promising practices, as well as issues and concerns identified by the participants regarding community involvement. The reports also included participant recommendations for improving parent and/or business involvement in their local partnership. Before the final reports were disseminated to all board members in each case study partnership, a draft was sent to case study participants requesting their feedback. Respondents' recommendations were incorporated into the reports. Three of the four partnerships accepted the evaluator's offer to revisit each site and discuss the results. The visits took a different form in each partnership (e.g., a meeting/discussion with the executive committee, a brief presentation to the full board, and a half hour discussion with the full board).

This report presents the prominent themes which emerged from the telephone interviews and the case studies. It is divided into three sections: statewide findings, promising practices (and corresponding issues), and summary and conclusions.

Statewide Findings

- **Parents and business people asserted their involvement is essential, and that each contributes something unique.**

  Parents suggested they bring to partnership effort's intimate knowledge and a "sense of reality" about the needs of families, as well as ideas about how to improve services. Business people noted they provide resources, skills, and expertise that can help the partnerships function more effectively and efficiently. Executive directors concurred with parents and business people and emphasized that the contributions of both are critical if partnerships are serious about achieving true community collaboration.

"Someone who has been there, is there, or who has passed through there, they can answer a lot better than someone who has never been there."

Parent

"Putting business people in there with sound business judgement, side by side with human service people. You get a very good balance. The idealism of human services people is tempered by the good business heads of the business people and vice-versa."

Business Person

- **Many local boards included more parent and business representatives than mandated by the legislation.**

  Half of the partnerships had more than two parent positions, ranging from three to eight. Thirteen partnerships had more than two business positions, ranging from three to ten. Many executive directors, parents, and business people contended that two parent positions and two business positions, as mandated, are not enough.

" The requirement [of 2 business representatives] doesn't match the expectation. It does the same thing for parents. We are always outnumbered. The others are there because they have to be there. We're there because we want to be there. We are committed. It doesn't make sense."

Business Person

- **Efforts to involve parents and business included a range of strategies, with a handful predominating.**

  Across the partnerships, executive directors reported an array of strategies to support parent and business involvement. However, the majority tended to focus on implementing only a few strategies rather than a comprehensive community involvement effort. The strategies used most often included: evening meetings and child care arrangements to involve parents; appointments of business people to leadership roles and solicitation of funds to involve business.

"We have to find creative ways to get their input without overburdening them."

Executive Director

"To be honest, if they had made more of an effort to involve me and give me some responsibility, I probably would still be involved. They only expected me to attend the meetings and I couldn't do that."

Business Person

Some parents and business representatives reported minimal efforts to involve them.

Despite the efforts reported by executive directors, parents in 33% of the partnerships and business people in 40% of the partnerships stated that very few or no extra efforts had been made to encourage or support their participation.

"They need to find a way to recruit more parents and let them know their opinion is really looked at- not going in one ear and out the other. Parents have had this experience and it turns them off."

Parent

Parents suggested increased numbers, community outreach, and improved attitudes regarding parent participation were essential to fully involve parents.

While parents agreed that the predominant parent involvement efforts (i.e., evening meetings and child care) are imperative, they contended that logistical support is not enough to ensure meaningful involvement. Creating a critical mass of parents by adding board positions and/or establishing a parent group, increasing communication and dialogue with more parents in the community, and giving parents greater attention and respect were considered top priorities among the parents interviewed.

"There is a need to really analyze the benefits for business involvement in Smart Start, package that, and design a PR effort specifically targeted at business. When business sees the practical connections and direct payoffs, they may be more likely and willing to become involved."

Business Person

Business people recommended public awareness, education, and more clearly and broadly defined roles were necessary to fully involve business.

In contrast to many partnerships' current business involvement efforts (i.e., appointments to leadership roles and solicitation of funds), business people emphasized the importance of increasing public awareness of Smart Start. They asserted that businesses must be educated about how Smart Start affects them and the benefits of their involvement. Business people also stressed the need to define more clearly the roles business can play in the partnership and they underscored the importance of expanding those roles beyond that of a financial backer.

Parents and business people both required logistical support, however, their needs differed and conflicted.

Business people favored early morning meetings, whereas evening meetings were best for parents. Many parents also needed child care and transportation. Business people wanted highly structured expeditious meetings. Parents, often with less board and decision making experience, desired more opportunities to ask questions and discuss issues.

"Now we only meet in the evenings for committee work and board meetings, even though the evenings are more difficult for the agency heads and business leaders, who prefer to meet during the day. It speaks well for the board. We give parent participation importance even at the inconvenience of other board members."

Executive Director

Involvement of most business representatives serving on the boards was very high. However, business participation beyond these individuals was much more limited.

The majority of business board members dedicated many hours and assumed significant leadership responsibilities within the local partnerships, although many small business owners found it much more difficult to maintain high levels of involvement. Despite strong participation among most business representatives serving on the boards, executive directors and business people reported that involvement of the broader business community was limited in most partnerships. Both groups hoped to see greater business participation in the future.

"As far as the individual level of involvement, I think it is high and I'm real happy with it. I would like to have more coordination to involve business."

Executive Director

Roles and levels of responsibilities differed between parents and business people.

Business people served primarily in leadership positions such as board chairs, officers, and committee chairs. Often connected to the executive committee, these positions ensured that business people were directly involved in influential decision-making. Parents served mostly as committee members, volunteers, and advocates. They fulfilled fewer leadership roles and had fewer opportunities to engage in influential decision-making.

"I would have liked to serve on the finance or the personnel committee. I think I could have learned a lot."

Parent

"Synergy is alive and well in collaboration. This is the best work I've ever done and I don't mean that boastfully."

Business Person

Business people reported higher levels of satisfaction regarding their participation than parents.

Highly involved business people were very satisfied with their participation, although many expressed a desire to decrease the intensity of involvement. Overall, parents were less involved and less satisfied. Many wished to become more involved and desired increased decision-making responsibilities. Time constraints and the lack of a meaningful role were the major sources of dissatisfaction for parents and business representatives.

"I am never satisfied. I always know that it could be more. It has been one of the toughest challenges. For parents there are always a lot of issues—trying to get a job for example...their involvement ebbs and wanes. We constantly have to work at and be committed to involving parents."

Executive Director

Parent involvement was an ongoing challenge for the majority of partnerships.

While, to date, many partnerships had placed greater focus and attention on parent involvement than on business involvement, executive directors reported it remained a continuing struggle to ensure that parents were "active," "motivated," and "interested." Less than 25% of the executive directors were satisfied with the levels of parent participation. Some even suggested the challenges were too difficult to overcome.

"Give them a choice. Don't decide for them. . . Because I find that a lot of low income families are willing to participate, and they are willing to make decisions that affects the lives of their children, if given the opportunity."

Parent

Perceptions were mixed regarding the extent to which low income families were willing and able to participate.

Some participants suggested involvement is not a priority for low income parents whose time, energy, and efforts are focused on meeting their families' needs. Others, particularly parents receiving subsidies, adamantly disagreed and maintained that many low income families do have a desire to participate, although provisions may be needed to facilitate and support their involvement.

Community involvement was more problematic in partnerships including large geographic regions and in rural counties.

Parent and business involvement tended to be lower and turnover was higher in these partnerships. Long travel distances to attend meetings and the greater reliance on small businesses, often with less time and fewer resources to contribute than "big" businesses, complicated and limited community participation.

"Everything is a small business, no large business here. It is difficult to give up the time. There is a lack of time."

Business Person

Pressures from the state deterred business participation and undermined the collaboration process.

The promise of local control had great appeal to business people, yet criticism of local decisions and constraints from both the Department of Human Resources and the legislature raised doubts about the state's commitment to local control. Participants reported this perpetuates the business community's concern that Smart Start is "just another government program" and leaves business hesitant to get involved. Further, participants complained that hectic startup up paces, quick turnaround times, and unrealistic time pressures made it difficult to take the time necessary to convene with various stakeholders and build consensus.

"The original concept was that Smart Start was a public-private partnership, with a lot of local decision-making. What it has wound up looking like is a state program with not as much local decision-making as was originally billed. That itself is a deadening fact when you try to involve business, because business will see it as a state program, state funded, state controlled, state influenced. Why should business want to get involved?"

Board Member

Sixty percent of the local partnerships experienced community representative turnover.

Parent and business turnover was approximately equal. A total of 57 representatives had left the twenty-four partnerships. There was a tendency for turnover to be repeatedly high in some sites. Executive directors most frequently identified time constraints and conflicting work and/or family responsibilities as the reasons for parent and business representative turnover.

"Time constraints. Both who left had their own small business, both served over one year and the time became overwhelming when they were trying to build their own business."

Executive Director

Executive directors assumed the major responsibility for supporting both parent and business participation.

"The executive director has been the most helpful and has listened to what I have to say. I would say the board or the agencies have done nothing. I am the only parent involved—don't get me wrong—in some ways it's just separate agencies getting money, not really collaborating."

Parent

Parents and business people consistently identified the executive director as encouraging and supportive of their participation. Beyond the executive director, parents and business people noted that different types of board members assumed this role. Parents cited child care, family resource center, church, and college representatives as supportive. In contrast, business people identified board chairs, government representatives, and other business leaders. Mandated agency people were rarely mentioned as supportive by parents and/or business people.

Promising Practices

Making a commitment to community involvement

"Our board as a whole has talked about the need to involve parents and to have developed the sensitivity and understand the importance. The board listens a whole lot better. This was part of the discussion in the collaboration sessions. They have been very tolerant to the inconveniences to themselves in order to facilitate parent involvement. My board gets it. They are really good."

Executive Director

In partnerships that have higher parent and business involvement, the executive director and the board share a strong belief in community involvement and make a conscious effort to facilitate and support it.

Issues and considerations

Careful attention must be given to guarantee that parent and business participation is equally valued. There can be a tendency to focus on one over the other, rather than emphasizing both.

Increasing the number and diversity of community representatives

The state mandated a small number of parent and business representatives to serve on the boards (2). Some partnerships have found expanding the number of community board positions eliminates the perception that all board members have a vested interest in receiving Smart Start funds. Through strength in numbers, parents feel more supported and are more confident to speak up.

Issues and considerations

Simply adding board representatives is not enough. Attention must be given to factors such as race, income level, gender, family composition, and business type so the board reflects the diverse populations the partnership serves. The number of parent and business positions must also be considered. When business representatives exceed parents, business has the potential to overshadow parent involvement.

"Don't be afraid of getting diversity in the same room. That type of collaboration is really the beginning of some pretty solid change. And when everybody is hearing the same thing, in the same room, working on solutions together, rather than trying to address problems apart, the effect can't help but be good."

Board Member

Recruiting and involving key community leaders

High profile parent and business leaders who are connected to larger community networks and constituencies make effective representatives and liaisons. Their affiliation increases the local partnership's visibility and credibility within the community. Parent leaders, familiar with organizational planning and decision-making, are more prepared to participate as board members than parents without prior leadership experience.

Issues and considerations

Low income parents often have fewer leadership opportunities, making it more difficult to recruit those with prior leadership experience. It is necessary to create parent leaders by teaching them skills and supporting them in leadership positions.

"There are no dormant members. All of the members are active in the board and in the community. I see that as the key to success."

Parent

Offering a wide range of roles to parent and business board members

"If you are interested, you can be on anything."

Parent

Community representatives come to the board with different interests, skills, and time to commit. When a wide range of roles are offered to both parents and business people, each is able to determine the part he or she wishes to play. Participant choice is more likely to ensure that all find an interesting and satisfying role.

Issues and considerations

Business people are valued for their contributions to personnel, administration, and fiscal activities: as a result, they are most often offered these roles. To develop parent leaders, parents need the same opportunities.

Supporting participation: Logistics and relationships

"There is definitely an effort to make me feel included. I have that feeling from the whole board or I wouldn't be on it. I think everybody makes an effort to somehow, in their own way, to make you feel a part of what's going on."

Parent

Effective community participation requires attending to both logistics and relationships. Parents and business people must be able to attend meetings and feel invited to actively participate. In partnerships that have high levels of parent satisfaction, parents identify a larger number of board members who are supportive and encouraging of their participation. Developing interpersonal relationships is key to supporting ongoing and meaningful involvement.

Issues and considerations

Different representatives have different logistical needs. These must be continuously negotiated. The encouragement and support of the executive director and a few other board members may not be enough. A more concerted effort could occur if mandated agency representatives also focused on developing relationships with community representatives.

Establishing reciprocal relationships

Collaborative relationships should be two-way; partners give and partners get. Partnerships have discovered it is important to find out what parents and business people hope to gain from their participation. Recognizing participants publicly, providing skills training for civic life, and offering forums/ information regarding family friendly polices are a few examples of how partnerships reciprocate for the contributions of parent and/or business people. contributions.

Issues and considerations

Business people think in terms of economic reciprocity. For example, when businesses contribute time and/or financial resources, some business people suggest it would be appropriate to buy their services/ products instead of the competitors' who have not contributed. Others may find this inappropriate. Defining appropriate forms of reciprocity may take considerable deliberation.

"It's not like 'What can you do for us?' It's 'What can we do for you?' And 'What can we do for each other?'"

Business Person

Defining community involvement broadly

Parent and business participation does not stop at the board. Opportunities for involvement are ample and widely available to nonboard community members at various levels within the partnership. Some examples include: working on committees, serving on parent advisory groups, attending public forums, providing input through surveys and/or focus groups, and serving in a range of roles in Smart Start funded agencies.

Issues and considerations

Involvement at these various levels does not ensure the community is influencing the decision-making process. Efforts must be made to make sure this happens. Also, some options (e.g., parent advisory groups and business advisory groups) may continue to keep constituents isolated from each other. This segregation prevents different stakeholders from communicating with one another and inhibits the consensus building process.

"Actually it's a good concept to have parent representatives on the board. I am not sure it is representative of the community or feasible for parents to participate. I think it's better to encourage parents and consumers to be involved in all aspects of planning and delivery of programs and projects. The board position is just one vehicle for doing that."

Executive Director

Sustaining and elaborating upon initial organizing efforts

"[Parents] liked to be involved in other ways. The word, board, is scary, something that belongs in somebody else's domain. In the partnership there are better ways to be involved...Outreach is very good. Parents are very receptive."
Executive Director

During the planning and organizing stages most partnerships established mechanisms for gaining stakeholders' input (e.g., door-to-door assessments, neighborhood/town hall meetings, and focus groups). When similar efforts are ongoing, board members are more informed, are better decision-makers, and can gauge the entire community's definitions of success. Together, this helps to ensure that the partnership is a community driven initiative.

Issues and considerations

Community outreach efforts require coordination and resources. To maintain these efforts, someone must be responsible for planning and implementing outreach, and resources (both money and time) must be committed.

Summary and Conclusions

Parents, business people, and executive directors strongly agreed that community involvement in Smart Start was essential. The majority of executive directors reported that their partnerships are striving toward active and meaningful community participation. Despite their efforts, parent and business participation remained a challenge for most. A closer examination of the case study partnerships uncovered eight promising practices that parents and business people identified as instrumental in supporting their involvement and contributing to their high levels of satisfaction. Within each of these partnerships, executive directors and board members maintained a strong commitment to community involvement and made it a priority. To that end, they employed various strategies to increase community participation by recruiting key community leaders, increasing the number of parent and business board members, and soliciting broader community involvement. These efforts helped to ensure that many diverse constituencies were represented in the decision-making process. Overall, great attention and care was given to assure that many community members were fully involved and felt welcome to participate.

Parent and business involvement presents both opportunities and challenges. If partnerships hope to overcome the challenges, then a goal for the future is to embrace the term *partnership*. This entails the creation of

mutually rewarding relationships characterized by an open exchange of ideas, knowledge, and resources with respect to partners' differing cultures and styles.[5] Partnerships must also include participation from diverse segments of the community and establish mutual respect, understanding, and trust among these members. According to collaboration research, the last two factors, diversity and trust, appear to be more important than any others in helping collaboration succeed.[6] While this study suggests that parent and business involvement is neither naturally nor easily realized, it reveals that community involvement is a goal worth pursuing. One Smart Start participant captures this sentiment best:

Partnership members recognize the importance of bringing the community into the process. However, trying to create an environment where everybody feels that he is a legitimate partner in the process, and to feel comfortable in expressing his or her opinions is tough to pull off...I think the goal of consumer involvement...is a very legitimate one, and it's one of the exciting features of Smart Start. And certainly, it's on the cutting edge of the kinds of programs we need in a democratic community.

Board Member

Notes

1. Galvin, P. F. (1996). School-business-university collaboratives: The economics of organizational choice. In J. Cibulka & W. Kritek (Eds.), *Coordination among schools, families, and communities.* New York: State University of New York Press.

2. Awsumb, C. (1995). *Reinventing government?: Perspectives on the Smart Start implementation process.* Report to the Department of Human Resources. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina.

3. Prior formative evaluations conducted by the Smart Start evaluation team include:

   Maxwell, K., Bryant, D., Adkins, A., & McCadden, B. (1994). *Emerging themes and lessons learned: The first year of Smart Start.* Report to the Department of Human Resources. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina.

   Bryant, D., & Adkins, A. (1995). *Keeping the vision in front of you: Results from Smart Start key participant interviews.* Report to the Department of Human Resources. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina.

   Awsumb, C. (1995). *Reinventing government?: Perspectives on the Smart Start implementation process.* Report to the Department of Human Resource. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina.

4. We recognize that community involvement in Smart Start may include a broader range of community representatives than just parents and business. However, in this report the term community is used interchangeably with parent and business involvement to mean parent and business involvement only.

5. Danzberger, J. Bodinger-deUriarte, C., & Clark, M. (1996). *A guide to promising practices in educational partnerships.* Washington, DC: The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

6. Mattessich, P. W., & Monsey, B. R. (1992). *Collaboration: What makes it work.* St. Paul, MN: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.